

EXHIBIT A.623



Al-Aqsa Brigades Shrugs Off U.S. 'Terrorism' Label
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JERUSALEM (Reuters) - An armed group linked to Palestinian President Yasser Arafat's Fatah faction shrugged off Friday a U.S. decision to designate it a "foreign terrorist organization," and vowed to carry out more attacks on Israel.

"This is a medal of honor that we wear on our chests," Nasser Awais, a commander of the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, said in a statement faxed to Reuters.

The group earlier claimed responsibility for a Jerusalem suicide bombing Thursday that killed three Israelis.

In the statement, Awais said the United States was the real criminal for protecting Israel "the number one terrorism and crime state in the world."

"On this occasion, al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades asserts it will continue on the road of resistance and martyrdom unconcerned about the American decision," he added.

State Department spokesman Philip Reeker said Thursday that Secretary of State Colin Powell has decided to designate the group a "foreign terrorist organization" on March 19, two days before the Jerusalem suicide attack.

"We notified Congress of the Secretary's decision yesterday ... and we're working very closely with Congress to expedite this process," Reeker told a news briefing.

The group has said one of its members carried out the Jerusalem attack in retaliation for Israel's assassination of its leaders and the killing of innocent Palestinians by the Israeli army.

Arafat condemned the bombing and pledged immediate action to stop further attacks against Israeli civilians.

Awais said the group held Arafat at a high esteem, but made no direct reference to his decision to act against attackers.

Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades is the first Palestinian group to be added to the U.S. list since the Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation began in September 2000.

Under U.S. law, it will now be illegal to provide funds or "material support" to the group and banks must freeze any funds held in its name.

Twenty-eight other groups have already been designated by the United States as "foreign terrorist organizations." Other active Palestinian groups on the list are Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).